

Clearwater Battle Artifacts Returned

Around noon, July 11, 1877, 400 U.S. Army soldiers under the command of General O.O. Howard began an attack on the encampment of non-treaty Nez Perce Indians by the South Fork of the Clearwater River near present-day Kamiah, Idaho. The Nez Perce included about 550 women and children and about 200 warriors, plus 2,000 to 3,000 horses. After initially surprising the Nez Perce the soldiers found themselves surrounded and unable to advance. By about 2:30 p.m. on July 12th, the soldiers renewed their attack after the arrival of reinforcements. The Nez Perce evacuated their families and horses around this time amid disagreement among the warriors as to whether to continue the fight.

"We were not whipped! We held all soldiers off the first day and, having better rifle pits, we could still have held them back. Not until the last of us leaped away did the soldiers make their charge. Some tepees, robes, clothing and food were left. The warriors were disagreeing, quitting the fight, had no time to pack the camp."

Yellow Wolf*

General Howard failed to follow-up his pursuit, instead allowing his soldiers to swarm through the tipis and help themselves to the personal possessions the Nez Perce were compelled to leave in their haste to escape.

A young Lieutenant, Harry L. Bailey of B Company, 21st Infantry was one of those who took possessions from the village. Bailey retired in Allen County, Ohio at the end of his military service and donated papers, photos, and artifacts to the Allen County Historical Society (ACHS) in Lima. The artifacts and Bailey's actions were documented by L.V. McWhorter in his books *Yellow Wolf, His Own Story* and *Hear Me, My Chiefs!* Bailey described the plunder by civilian volunteers and soldiers and his own efforts to get "a few things as souvenirs." He describes how

each thing was taken from him as he looked after his troops but concludes, "I saved a few and sent them to Ft. Lapwai by pack train ... a very few are now in the Allen County, Ohio, Memorial Building of Lima, Ohio." (McWhorter 1986: 322)

NPS historian Jerome Greene found out about the artifacts during a research visit to Lima. He was writing a Historic Resource Study on the 1877 War for Nez Perce NHP and called the artifacts to my attention in 1995. The collection consisted of an unadorned child's deer hide dress, a beaded sheath and five brass trade bells.

In July, I called Raymond Schuck the Director of the Museum in Lima to discuss whether the ACHS would consider allowing these artifacts to be returned to their homeland, either to the National Park Service or the Nez Perce Tribe. I explained that they had been taken from people who had not wanted war and whose descendants felt a very strong connection to them. Mr. Schuck agreed to bring the question before the board of directors. At the time of this contact, I was deeply involved in the efforts to return the Spalding-Allen Collection, then owned by the Ohio Historical Society, to Nez Perce Country. No agreement had been made at that time between the Nez Perce and OHS and so the discussion with the Allen County Historical Society took on a sensitive aspect that could only be resolved by the passage of time.

After discussions with Mr. Schuck it became clear that the board of directors of the ACHS would look favorably on a request to return the artifacts to Idaho regardless of whether it came from the NPS or the tribe. This was so, because the collection was clearly documented in collection records and in the written and oral record of the 1877 war. The ACHS believed that under the circumstances it was simply the right thing to do.

After making this known to the Nez Perce Tribe, we decided in the fall of 1997 that the Nez Perce Tribe would make a formal request asking for the return of the collection, and that the NPS would write in support of that request. ACHS was concerned for the professional care of the

* McWhorter 1983:100.

artifacts once they were returned to Idaho. Our letter described the collection storage facilities at the Spalding Visitor Center and our staff situation. We explained that Nez Perce Park has housed and cared for an important collection of artifacts owned by the tribe for many years through a cooperative agreement. This was a logical arrangement stemming from the park's enabling legislation and from years of cooperation and trust built up between park staff, tribal members and tribal government. The Nez Perce Tribe does not have a facility to house its collection and so it was agreed some time ago that given the importance of this collection, the park would store, curate, and display it.

It was not until March 2, 1998, that the formal request from the tribe was sent to the ACHS. Our letter of support followed shortly after. In July, Josiah Pinkham, the tribe's ethnographer called me with the news that ACHS was returning the artifacts to the tribe.

On August 12, Nez Perce Tribal Executive Committee Chair, Samuel Penney and Josiah Pinkham were in the Allen County Museum with museum staff and Board members. A solemn and simple ceremony marked the return of the artifacts to the Nez Perce tribe. "It was good that these people knew the proper place for these artifacts and I am thankful that they were willing to

follow their heart. The toughest thing to look at was the dress; to think that a child that small would be involved in a war." (Josiah Pinkham) Two days later, Josiah Pinkham and Nakia Williamson, also from the tribe's Cultural Resources Department, brought the artifacts to the Nez Perce National Historical Park's Cultural Resources office. Within a short time the loan agreement was signed, accession documents prepared, catalog numbers assigned and a storage space selected.

We stood looking at the dress and other artifacts and could not help being moved by their presence. How could one look at these things and not wonder what untold story they held. What had become of the young girl to whom this dress belonged? Had she survived the 1,300-mile flight to escape the Army? What about the owner of the beaded sheath? Was it an awl case or had it been used to hold medicine? What had the owner of the trade bells intended to use them for and what had happened to cause them to be left behind? These are touch stones to one of the most tragic events in Nez Perce and American history. They speak of the lives and hopes and dreams of a people who had prided themselves on their good relations with the white intruders to their land. They speak of a creative, strong and intelligent people who, when forced to fight, gave an account of themselves which is now legendary.

Almost three years had elapsed between first learning of these artifacts and their return to Nez Perce country. Many other things had occurred during that time. Foremost was the successful fundraising effort that allowed the Nez Perce people to purchase the Spalding-Allen Collection and return it to Idaho. This was a sweet success because of the overwhelming support of the American public who contributed to this cause.

The return of the Clearwater Battlefield artifacts carried this same sweet feeling for me, but for different reasons. The staff and leadership of the Allen County Museum simply made a professional decision based on understanding, an appreciation of the importance of local history, and the need to have the artifacts returned to the people and place where their story resides. This may seem like a small thing, an easy thing. But in this time where many institutions choose to "capitalize" on a situation to their advantage, Walter White, Raymond Schuck and the others at the Allen County Museum chose simply to give back what had been taken so many years before.

References

- McWhorter, L.V. *Yellow Wolf, His Own Story*, Caxton Press, Caldwell, Idaho, 1983 Revised and Enlarged Edition.
 McWhorter, L.V. *Hear Me, My Chiefs!*, Caxton Press, Caldwell, Idaho, 1986

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